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## FLARR Pages #9: Teaching Preterite vs. Imperfect in Spanish

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## FLARR PAGES #9

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File under:  
-Preterite and  
Imperfect  
-Verbs in  
Context  
-Use of English  
in Classroom

### "Teaching Preterite vs. Imperfect in Spanish"

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While textbooks have approached the troublesome practice of teaching the preterite and imperfect in a variety of ways, I have found that those that insist on a "Spanish-only" approach, working strictly in the target language, simply do not deliver the best results when it comes to student comprehension of the past tenses. A concept that does not exist in one's own native language (assuming here that it is English) can not be explained using the foreign language. The difference between preterite and imperfect seems to be one of the most difficult cases which is not best served by the modeling and example techniques afforded by the proficiency or natural methods, especially when practiced on older adolescents and adults who are more likely to analyze than to model.

Consequently, I prefer selecting or composing a paragraph in English, isolating the verbs in the past tense and asking the students to, without translating, simply decide which past tense each verb should be in Spanish. The following serves as an example:

It was (1) a gorgeous Sunday afternoon as Juan and Marta **strolled** (2) through the plaza. Other people **smiled** (3) at the happy couple as they **laughed** (4) and **talked** (5). They **were lost** (6) in their own world of contentment. They **sat down** (7) on a bench that **was** (8) near the central fountain which **sprayed** (9) the water in several directions. Soon Juan **suggested** (10) they enter the church that **stood** (11) nearby. He **said** (12) he **wanted** (13) to light a candle for his grandparents. Once inside, he **knelt down** (14) and **brought out** (15) a box which he **placed** (16) in Marta's hand. She **opened** (17) it and inside **there was** (18) an engagement ring. Marta **gasped** (19). When Juan **asked** (20) her to be his wife, she **threw** (21) her arms around his neck and **covered** (22) his face with kisses, saying, "Yes, yes, yes!"

An initial distinction needs to be made between foreground and background.

Before determining the tenses the entire paragraph must be read through in order to determine the context of each verb. An initial distinction then needs to be made between **foreground**, or actions that are part of the singular events happening, and **background**, or

actions that had either already occurred at some previous point in time or are viewed on the part of the speaker as in progress, ongoing, customary, or repeated. The ongoing background action in the sample paragraph is introduced at the beginning with the imperfect verbs **was** (1), **strolled** (2), **smiled** (3), **laughed** (4), **talked** (5), and **were lost** (6). Listing the acts that we assume took place only once in the time frame circumscribed in the paragraph's narrative can reveal the majority of the preterite verbs. We then find that the first action placed against the preliminary background action verbs is the preterite **sat down** (7). The following verbs fall under this description as well and must be considered as preterite: **suggested** (10), **said** (11), **knelt** (14), **brought out** (15), **placed** (16), **opened** (17), **gasped** (19), **asked** (20), **threw** (21), and **covered** (22). These can then be placed in relief against the remaining actions that are not viewed as part of the events in the story: the bench **was** (8) located--everyday--near the fountain which customarily **sprayed** (9) water, and the church has always **stood** (11) nearby. The verb **wanted** (13) brings up the case of the use of the imperfect for mental states or emotions, and finally, the ring **being** (18) in the box is presented here as the result of a previous action.

One sentence examples in Spanish lead all too often to guessing by students.

When teaching the use of the past tenses via examples in Spanish where a choice must be made between the two, selecting the imperfect to indicate habitual or background action, and mental/emotional states of being, etc. in opposition to the brevity and finality connoted by the use of the preterite, instructors discover much guessing on the part of students all too often, especially in single sentence examples.

For students, English presentation can better illustrate some of the finer distinctions between the tenses.

The aforementioned popularity of Spanish-only methodologies has led most texts to include paragraphs in Spanish as examples in their grammar explanations. While this does offer the student a glimpse into the comparative meanings of the tenses, I have found that if this is the only contextual presentation, it can fail to illustrate some of the finer distinctions between the tenses that are more discernible when presented in English. Testing should of course be done in the target language, but only within the clarifying context that a paragraph offers.

Testing should be done within the context of a clarifying paragraph and in the target language.